DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 593 JC 870 220

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TITLE The Vassar Summer Program for Community College Students.
PUB DATE 22 Apr 87
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (67th, Dallas, TX, April 22-25, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Education); *College Environment; *College Transfer Students; Community Colleges; Higher Education; *Intercollegiate Cooperation; Private Colleges; Program Descriptions; Residential Institutions; *Summer Programs; Team Teaching; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *Vassar College NY

ABSTRACT

In 1985, Vassar College initiated a summer program to introduce two-year college students to the educational experience of a school such as Vassar with the rationale that such exposure would improve transfer rates to four-year residential colleges. The program's initial goals were to: (1) identify community college students who, judging by their aptitude and interest, could complete a bachelor's degree, but whose backgrounds contained no experience of such educational settings; (2) develop up to five liberal arts courses, which would be team-taught by faculty from Vassar and the community colleges, would meet the curricular credit requirements of both schools, and would make academic demands equivalent to those of regular Vassar courses; (3) develop adequate support services including peer counseling; (4) develop funding to cover students' attendance costs; and (5) test the program's effectiveness in order to encourage replication in other settings. The program enrolled 26 community college students during the first summer and 31 during the second. All but one student completed the program. Overall grade point averages among the group were higher than those of regular Vassar enrollees, and follow-up analysis suggested that all program participants were attending or planning to attend a four-year institution. (PAA)

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The Vassar Summer Program for Community College Students

A Report to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges

April 22, 1987

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The summer program for Community College students at Vassar College, now entering its third year, came about in response to a specific set of concerns which the institutions represented in the AACJC and four-year colleges such as mine have in common. And, while our three institutions could hardly be more different, it's interesting to me that the program I am here to tell you about shares something of June Dempsey's approach and something of Dick Yeo's, since I have both been involved in dealing with questions of course equivalency between two-year and four-year curricula and been engaged, in the past two summers, in setting up not a separate degree program but a mini-college, having its own funding, faculty, curriculum, students and support services. I am going to describe it for you, briefly, and then to speak about the outcomes and implications of this experiment, as I see them, for students, for faculty and for the institutions which have thus far participated in it.

Community College transfers to Vassar are not unusual. We have, in Dutchess County Community College, just across Poughkeepsie, a very good community college and, over the years, excellent students have transferred with good results between the two schools and between other two-year colleges in-state and outside New York and Vassar. Still, talking with some of these students, with teachers at Dutchess and, since 1983, in my collaboration with LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, Queens, on their Ford Foundation transfer-study grant, some troubling facts became clear. I became concerned, first, that, apparently, many able two-year college students who ought to continue and complete their undergraduate degrees fail to go on to four-year institutions and, second, that those who elect to continue do not often consider residential, liberal arts institutions to be among their options. Equally troubling was the fact that, of those who do continue, far too few are minority students.

Some of my colleagues --among them Vassar's president-- and I suspected that a major impediment to the successful transfer of these students to schools like ours was their radical unfamiliarity with most elements of the educational environment and experience we represent and the real inability of even the most informed counseling and of the best written information to convey this experience. Recognizing both the educational vitality which comes from cultural diversity and the obligation to lead in extending educational opportunities as widely as possible, the Vassars, Dartmouths, Swarthmores, Oberlins, Carletons and Browns have been wrestling for years over the comparatively few excellent minority and non-traditional two-year college students whose circumstances made their aptitude for our kind of study

rather obvious. But we suspected that there was another, appropriate constituency in the two-year colleges --one which needed, by a sustained and collaborative effort between public and private education, to be developed.

The Program

Our goals were, first, to identify this constituency in selected community colleges and then to develop it by providing as many as possible of these students the opportunity to experience for themselves just what learning in an independent, residential setting was like. Trying to put them as little in jeopardy as possible and supplying them with the particular supports and assessment resources they would need in order to use this program in planning their educational futures, we hoped to replicate the experience of study at Vassar --the pressures as well as the pleasures-- for students who had, most of them, never heard of the place or who, if they had, probably had the attitude, as my LaGuardia colleague Janet Lieberman put it, that 'it's for other people.' While we clearly expected some increase in our own transfer applications from this population, we recognized --both because Vassar is not the best school for absolutely everyone to attend and because our resources for scholarship aid to transfer students is limited-- that, as has been the case, a raised consciousness and informed interest in our kind of education would lead to applications to other, similar schools. We also thought a quite acceptable outcome of our experiment, for some students, would be the discovery, based on genuine evidence and advice, that our kind of residential, liberal arts training was not what they wanted. This has also been the case for a few of our students.

Initially with Vassar funds and help, through the Association of American Colleges, from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and, in our second and third years, with funding from the Ford Foundation, the Starr Foundation, the Seth Sprague Foundation, Chase Manhattan Bank and private sources, well over one hundred students from five community colleges in New York State will, by the end of this summer, have lived and studied on our campus and will have earned Vassar credits applicable to both the Associate's and the Bachelor's degrees. They will also --if our past two years' experience can be a guide-- have significantly addressed and, in most cases, altered their plans for their future education.

Our initial plans were ambitious, but can be clearly enough stated:

- Identify up to fifty community college students whose teachers or guidance counsellors feel would best, because of both

aptitude and interests, complete their undergraduate degrees at an independent, residential liberal arts college, but who had, neither in their own nor their family's background, experience with this kind of educational setting.

- Develop up to five courses, team-taught by a Vassar teacher or one from a similar college and a community college faculty member. The courses were to be in all ways commensurate with introductory courses at Vassar, both in range and in approach; they were to be truly introductory to a field or discipline integral in the liberal arts curriculum; and they were to be limited in enrollment to eighteen students, both so that the collegiate class 'feel' could be maintained and so that frequent attention could be paid in them to written and oral expression. The courses naturally needed also to be acceptable both toward fulfillment of the community college degree requirements and to our own and they needed, of course, to meet all the specifications of New York State.

- Develop adequate support services to aid students in the anticipated difficulties of moving from a learning environment which was part-time and non-residential to a full-time, residential immersion like the usual undergraduate semester at Vassar. These supports included peer-counsellors -- themselves transfer students from community colleges-- living in the dormitory, a writing specialist from our Academic Resource Center, a specialist in general study skills, a specialist from the Microcomputer Resource Center and advisors from the Admissions and Financial Aid Offices.

- Develop funding adequate for the students to attend the summer program at no direct cost to themselves.

- Test the program's assumptions and methods in such a way as to encourage its replication in other settings.

Our assumptions and general goals for this program have proved to be realistic and I believe that the specific plans I have just noted have been pretty well realized. Owing to the lateness of our funding in the earlier two years, our

enrollment goals were twenty-five and thirty students, respectively, and, in fact, twenty-six students were enrolled in the program in the first summer and thirty-one enrolled last year. Of the fifty-seven student participants thus far, sixteen have been men and forty-one have been women and, each year, LaGuardia Community College has accounted for about two-thirds of the students, the others coming from Dutchess, Rockland, Sullivan and Ulster County Community Colleges. The ethnic background of our students has been 3% Asian, 38% Black, 28% Hispanic and 31% Caucasian; their ages ranged from nineteen to forty and their average age is about twenty-three.

While we have received the applications, personal essays, recommendations and transcripts of nearly seventy applicants from four community colleges for this summer, the faculty will not meet until May 1 to select this year's fifty students.

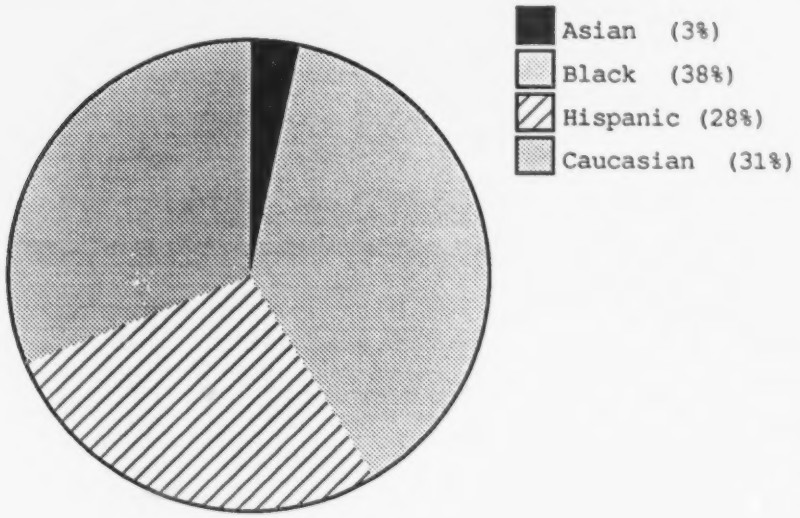

Fig. 1 1985 and 1986 Summer Program Participants by Ethnic Origin

The team-taught courses in our program have ranged across the liberal arts curriculum and have tended often to be even more adventurously interdisciplinary than our usual, comparatively innovative curricular offerings. The roster of courses thus far includes a course in Cognitive Science: 'The Science and Practice of Thinking,' two in Literature: 'Conflict and Celebration in American Writing' and 'Literature and Politics,' one in Computer Science: 'Computing as a Resource,' one in Urban Studies, 'Community Studies,' and two interdepartmental courses: 'Environmental

Impacts: Technology, Resources and Social Values' and 'Biology and Ethics: Genetic Engineering.' Five courses for this year are being planned by teachers from LaGuardia and Dutchess Community Colleges and Vassar and Wesleyan University in the areas of literature, music, field biology, political science and urban studies.

We have had to learn more, perhaps, in the area of support services than in the others I have touched on. We were determined not to undervalue the students' abilities nor to give them, in the academic demands placed on them, anything but a real sense of being Vassar students. In the first summer, particularly, I was afraid that we might have over-done it. Our writing specialist, a valued veteran of many years' working not only with our own students' writing difficulties, but with those of students in the local community college, had to nearly entirely scrap his plans for a systematic analysis and for individual help to students as he found himself putting out brush-fires from the very beginning, due to the considerable disparity between what was expected from students in the condensed, four week, four class-hour a day, five day a week schedule and what they were used to. Last summer, as we expanded the program --not solely because of the unanimous student insistence on it in their evaluations-- to five weeks, he found that he was able to accomplish more of the sort of long-term assistance he is happiest in giving, and the micro-computer specialist also found that students across the program and not only in the courses specifically requiring it were able to acquire a fair degree of computer literacy. With no class meetings on Wednesday, students were able, as Janet Lieberman put it in a recent report to the Ford Foundation, 'to catch up, to read and reread, to use the library, get help and "flake out."'

Introducing these students to the social aspect of residential living has also required a great deal of attention and support, particularly from the peer counsellors, whose efforts have been remarkable in the past two summers. In the report I have just quoted, Janet notes that:

> Both students and faculty of two year colleges expect that college is only a part time endeavor; students work, care for families and participate fully in urban life. In contrast, residential four year students generally dedicate full time to study and the academic demands reflect that commitment.

While Janet may be seeing the earnestness of four-year, residential students through some fairly rosy glasses --or perhaps that actually <u>was</u> her experience at Vassar and Barnard some years ago-- her observation about the differing <u>academic</u> expectations of residential and non-residential

learning has even broader implications in the acclimatization of two-year students to an environment such as Vassar's. To our surprise, after both summers' programs, the single biggest worry to overcome, as expressed by students in their evaluations at exit, was living away from home and in the constant company of others; it came also to be, along with their sense of personally accomplishing something that sometimes seemed to challenge them beyond their limits, one of the two accomplishments of which the majority of them felt most proud. One of the student fellows, herself a transfer to Vassar from LaGuardia, described the evolution of this accomplishment with much feeling and a good deal of precision in her final report:

> During the first week of classes, something special began to occur. ...students began to organize their own group study sessions. Not only did they lend books to each other, they also read chapters of books aloud. Student-instructed mini-classes became their...mode of communication.... Soon conversation[s] resembled a teaching session and then they resembled a learning experience. There never seemed to be a moment where the students were not learning about academics or about life.

This program seems expensive --at least in terms that an independent, liberal arts college is accustomed to. Last summer's program, for 31 students, generating 62 Vassar units of credit, or roughly 219 semester hours of credit cost about $59,000, or $836 per unit, which, when compared with last year's per unit cost during the regular term in the College, $1,110, may make it seem as though we have founded a real bargain and should probably be put in charge all year 'round. My colleagues in the Financial offices, however, would be quick to point out that maintaining our 1,100 acre campus, supporting our libraries, laboratories and galleries and continuing our extraordinary paid leave policy for faculty -- not to mention the nearly $5 million dollar financial aid budget for the regular year-- requires an added expenditure from the College's endowment of roughly $6,000 per student, or --even more roughly-- $700 per unit to meet the actual costs of our regular college year. The summer program 'rides' on many of these expenditures and contributes only tangentially to any of them.

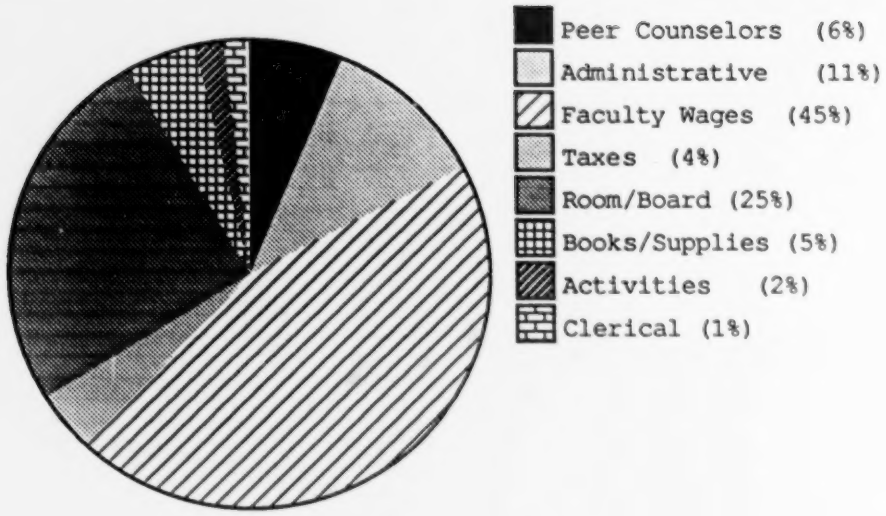

Fig. 2 Summer Program Expenses, 1986

Every evaluation of our work, from the students' exit statements to the considered review of a consultant who spoke with as many past participants as could make it to our 'reunion' last January, has emphasized the importance to both students and teachers of the team-teaching approach, which, if we are to keep to our goal of emulating the small, discussion-oriented class, means a student/faculty ratio of something like 8 to 1. This unusual level of cost is reflected in nearly all the elements of our program and we have been entirely reliant on grants either from the College or from the several foundations I have named. Part of our financial planning had been based on New York State's very generous Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which adjusts in proportion not only to students' needs but to the costs at the institutions --within the state-- that they attend. We found, however, that financial aid offices at community colleges, where there might theoretically be a greater percentage of needy students, were really not well-informed about such matters as 'adjusting TAP,' and, moreover, guidance counselors were wary of recommending the assignment of TAP monies to work in our program, fearing that students would 'run short' as they neared the end of their degree work. This is not, of course, a real worry, both because the courses in the program apply directly to their two-year degree requirements and because, once accepted and aided by a four year institution such as Vassar, students don't 'run short' of aid for a course or two, but often are aided for second majors, ninth semesters and even for fifth years. We are determined to recover these state funds in future summers.

By the end of this summer's program, we will have included students from five community colleges and teachers from three junior and two four-year colleges among the program's participants but we are only beginning, I believe, to realize our goal of encouraging interest and collaboration in our ideas on many other campuses. Again, partly because of the slow development of our funding in the first two years, it was impossible to ask teachers at other four-year institutions early enough to plan to devote part of their valuable summer time to our work at Vassar. Still, when invitations to participate went out last October to deans at five schools similar to Vassar, only three, apparently, were able to stir some interest on their campuses and only one, Wesleyan, has supplied us with a faculty member. However, both the very positive responses of the representatives of schools, foundations or educational organizations who have seen the program in operation and the recent interest shown, among others, by another large community college in New York City and by a progressive Massachusetts community college in joining in our work in future summers, encourage me to think that, as our work is becoming more visible in meetings such as this one, as our 'alumni/ae' continue their four-year studies at a range of colleges and universities and as we encourage more campus visits during the summer, we will be more able, as a representative of the Association of American Colleges has urged us --to 'go forth and multiply.'

Outcomes and Implications

So much for description. In the time that's left I'd like to address some of the outcomes and the implications of our experiment in helping this constituency of two-year college students explore transfer to a four-year college like Vassar.

For the student participants, the outcomes have been almost universally gratifying. Only one student in the past two summers, owing to illness, failed to complete the expected two courses --about seven semester hours of work-- and the students' grades, while they have ranged across the scale are, because of the high motivation of these students, the selectivity of their admission and the careful oversight of their work, somewhat higher than the usual Vassar range.

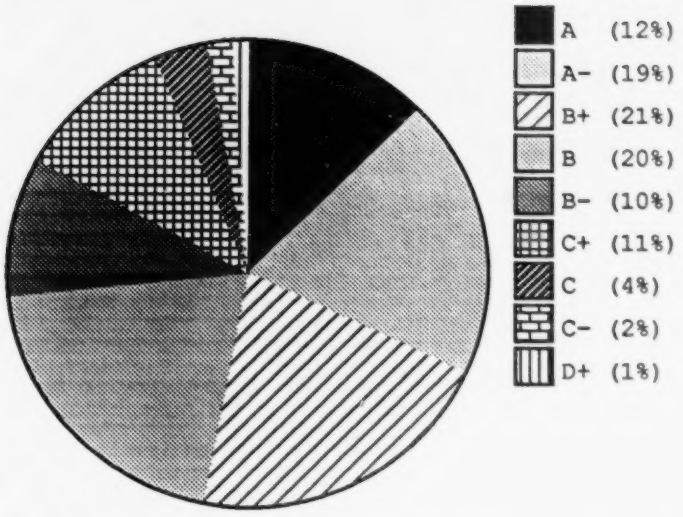

Fig. 3 Grade Distribution for Summer Program Students, 1985 and 1986

Behind the generally excellent transcripts of the students' work are the many stories of raised self-esteem and raised expectations. I have resisted thus far much quotation from the several questionnaires and evaluations we have solicited from students and faculty in this program and I shall continue to resist it. They speak most movingly and most pointedly about their experiences --and the individual and personal achievements are what convince us most that our experiment has been a success-- but the harder data is what I must concern myself with here.

To the best of our knowledge, every student who has participated in the Vassar summer program is now attending or plans to attend a four-year college or university. Of the sixteen LaGuardia students in the first summer's group, one is finishing her junior year at Vassar, two are at Clark, four are at New York University and the others are attending a senior college within the City University of New York. Eight of last summer's students have applied to Vassar for the Fall, one has already been accepted at Middlebury, one is attending Marist College and another has been accepted at Siena College, in upstate New York. We are awaiting the reports from the other students and the faculty and administrative staff of the summer program, along with Vassar's admissions and financial aid officers, have been assisting and advising them as the transfer application season has progressed. I think their chances of gaining admission are very good and I know that most of them would not have made the applications they have made, had they not spent part of their summer in Poughkeepsie.

The outcomes and implications of our two summers of work for our faculties have also been both gratifying and somewhat surprising. Both the Vassar faculty members and those joining us from two-year colleges have grown in expected and unexpected ways. For community college faculty, team-teaching with their Vassar colleagues has provided a powerful antidote to the tedium of their usual terms; they report returning to the community college asking for more from themselves and their students --and being supported in this renewal by students returning with them from the summer program. This mutual support seems an important by-product of the summer experience and will, I believe, aid in recruitment of both faculty and students from the participating community colleges in the future.

Janet Lieberman describes the implications for members of both faculties in her Ford Foundation report:

> ...research [tells us] that interaction with other faculty is the chief source of professional growth. Both Vassar and LaGuardia reported that their teaching changed as a result of the summer experience.
>
> Individual faculty members reported that the opportunity to share perceptions around a common content from different ... disciplines 'puts you on your toes.' Both faculties enjoyed the opportunity to create new interdisciplinary courses and in each case, individual teachers brought these new curricula back to their institutions.
>
> Firm in the knowledge that students could reach higher expectations, LaGuardia began to demand more of their students which ran contrary to the usual pressure to soften standards.... The LaGuardia faculty recognized a broader range of abilities in the students and acknowledged that the students haven't really been challenged.
>
> Vassar faculty found themselves immersed in the learning community. They remarked on the consistency of attendance; students always come to class. That phenomenon plus the fact that students had always attempted the assignment enabled the teacher to consolidate the instruction.... The four year college faculty found the two year students more active, more challenging and more demanding in the classroom. The community college students asked, 'Why are we doing this?' In some respects the four year students seemed more passive, 'more jaded by comparison' and the faculty enjoyed the change of dynamics in the classroom.

Finally, what are some of the outcomes and implications for our institutions as a whole from this brief collaboration? First, we feel that, with cooperation beginning at the senior administrative level, our summer experiment demonstrates that innovative two-year and highly selective four-year colleges can collaborate, without detailed articulation agreements and other interlocking arrangements to identify students with strong abilities and motivation and to expand their educational plans and achievements. Vassar's new President has committed the College to seek funding for a further three years of our summer program, during which time we will work to secure its future place in the overall structure of the institution. The faculty friendships which have grown between our campus and the others have prompted proposals for summer internships and, in fact, two of last summer's students will be working as academic interns in ongoing science research at Vassar this summer in our Undergraduate Research Summer Institute (URSI), which is funded partly through a grant from GTE. Other forms of collaboration, including faculty exchanges, have been discussed and, with the interest and involvement of Vassar's Director of Admissions and of our Director of Financial Aid, our group of transfer students next Fall will not only be larger than in past years but will bear a direct effect of this program. There will be notably more and better acclimated community college transfer students in next year's entering group.

Conclusion

In January, in the middle of one of last winter's several great snowstorms, we welcomed all available past participants in our program back to the campus for a day-long 'Symposium on Transfer.' While the meeting had something of a party atmosphere, we hoped to use it both to supply past student participants with advice about their future plans and, particularly, to assess our accomplishments and failings thus far and to plan for the future of this enterprise. Part of that meeting was the participation of a consultant, Anne-Marie McCartan, kindly supplied us by the Association of American Colleges. Ms. McCartan, of course, shared the great personal enthusiasm of participation in this program:

> Anyone attending the annual winter 'reunion' as I did ...could not help but appreciate the joyful spirit of the participants. Students from Dutchess County, for example, were anxious that a snowstorm would cause the busload of LaGuardia...students journeying to Poughkeepsie...to turn back. Their excitement when their former classmates burst into the room was heartwarming. ...the fact that several dozen students took a day off from their busy schedules to see each other and their former

teachers is evidence of the effect of the program on students.

Ms. McCartan's report, however, has also made clearer to me that some questions raised in this program --at least implicitly-- are considerably greater than the already quite ambitious goals we had begun with. While we must quantify more precisely the effect we have had on the academic plans of community college students, we must also be more precise about the degree and durability of faculty development our institutions seek from this program. Does, for example, the kind of renewing development I've mentioned today result in better student learning as well as faculty renewal? What are the best disciplinary 'matches' for this kind of teaching and is there a trade off between using this program for renewal of a new group of faculty each summer versus offering a curriculum to students developed and taught over time by a veteran group? Is there, as several teachers in the program have suggested to me, a set of techniques or pedagogical attitudes which are special to 'transitional teaching,' that is, teaching a group of students whose reason for assembling is in part to explore an entirely new learning setting, probably more than to explore one or another specific subject matter? Is there a rationale for one mix of urban versus rural students rather than another and what might be the most desirable racial or ethnic mix? And what's the role of the growing number of 'alumni/ae' of this curious little summer college and what's our continuing obligation, once the Vassar summer program has started these promising students along the road to application to highly selective --and highly expensive-- liberal arts institutions? And on and on....

While we look for the time and wisdom to confront such questions, the immediate prospect of choosing our fifty students and beginning, on June 24, our five summer classes looms directly ahead and just beyond that lies the task of funding the summers of '88, '89 and '90. My own time, these past six month, has been devoted mainly to a research leave and to the editing of one of the fourteen volumes of <u>The Collected Edition of the Works of W. B. Yeats</u> and, thinking about these puzzling but engaging prospects of our summer program for community college students, I have come to appreciate again the title and point of one of his poems about his work in the Abbey Theatre. Developing and nurturing this exhilarating experiment has indeed taught me about 'The Fascination of What's Difficult.'

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